The following extract is the first chapter of the novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, by Margaret Atwood. Read the extract at least twice and then do the following activities:

- First annotate the extract below underlining and commenting on any aspects of it which you find interesting.
- Take the five Ws as your starting point and then discuss whether we can predict anything about the themes, genre and narrator of the novel from reading this extract.
- What is the effect of this chapter as an opening to the novel? Make a list of questions which it raises for the reader.

We slept in what had once been the gymnasium. The floor was of varnished wood, with stripes and circles painted on it for the games that were formerly played there; the hoops for the basketball nets were still in place, though the nets were gone. A balcony ran around the room, for the spectators, and I thought I could smell, faintly like an afterimage, the pungent scent of sweat, shot through with the sweet taint of chewing gum and perfume from the watching girls, felt-skirted as I knew from pictures, later in mini-skirts, then pants, then in one earring, spiky green-streaked hair. Dances would have been held there; the music lingered, a palimpsest of unheard sound, style upon style, an undercurrent of drums, a forlorn wail, garlands made of tissue-paper flowers, cardboard devils, a revolving ball of mirrors, powdering the dancers with a snow of light.

There was old sex in the room and loneliness, and expectation, of something without a shape or name. I remember that yearning for something that was always about to happen and was never the same as the hands that were on us there and then, in the small of the back, or out back, in the parking lot, or in the television room with the sound turned down and only the pictures flickering over lifting flesh.

We yearned for the future. How did we learn it, that talent for insatiability? It was in the air; and it was still in the air, an afterthought, as we tried to sleep, in the army cots that had been set up in rows, with spaces between so we could not talk. We had flannelette sheets, like children’s, and army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S. We folded our clothes neatly and laid them on the stools at the end of the beds. The lights were turned down but not out. Aunt Sara and Aunt Elizabeth patrolled; they had electric cattle prods slung on thongs from their leather belts.

No guns though, even they could not be trusted with guns. Guns were for guards, specially picked from the Angels. The guards weren’t allowed inside the building except when called, and we weren’t allowed out, except for our walks, twice daily, two by two around the football field which was enclosed not by a chain-link fence topped with barbed wire. The Angels stood outside it with their backs to us. They were objects of fear to us, but of something else as well. If only they would look. If only we could talk to them. Something could be exchanged, we thought, some deal made some trade-off, we still had our bodies. That was our fantasy.

We learned to whisper almost without sound. In the semi-darkness we could stretch out our arms, when the Aunts weren’t looking, and touch each other’s hands across space. We learned to lip-read, our heads flat on the beds, turned sideways, watching each other’s mouths. In this way we exchanged names, from bed to bed: Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.

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Questions

1. The handling of time in the novel is extremely important. Identify the different times described in this extract.

2. In the third paragraph we are told ‘We yearned for the future’. How does Atwood create the impression that the narrator now longs to return to the past?

3. The narrator is unnamed. Is there anything to suggest the narrator’s sex?

4. Describe the atmosphere of the chapter.

5. The narrator is sleeping with others in what used to be a gym. On what occasions are buildings used as temporary accommodation for large numbers of people? Does this help you to work out the narrator’s situation in this chapter?

6. What do you think is the role of the Angels and Aunts in the novel? What is interesting about these names?

7. Are there any signs that the women in the gym are trying to resist the regime they are in?